The Richmond That Poe Knew

BY PHILIP ALEXANDER BRUCE.

In a letter which Poe wrote to F. W. Thomas, one of his friends, he said: "I am a Virginian; at least, I call myself one, for I have resided all my life, until the last few years, in Richmond."

What, in Poe's youth, were some of the aspects, social and physical, of this interesting and charming old city—we say old, because with the exception of Charleston and Annapolis, it had been in existence longer than the capitals of the other Southern States abutting upon the Central Atlantic waters? It was here, on a granite islet securely anchored at the foot of the foaming falls in James River, that Newport had set up a wooden cross on taking possession of the surrounding wilderness of primeval forest; it was here, on a high hill, casting its shadow across the picturesque canon of the roaring and darting stream, that the first William Byrd had built a mansion; and it was here, in the damp hollow of Shockoe Creek, in a squat stone house still standing, that he had exchanged red and blue coats, parti-colored cloth, and guns and powder with the Indians for furs. As the falls formed an insurmountable barrier to the progress of boats farther westward, and as there were no roads for carrying off by wagon the tobacco grown upon the lands towards the mountains, the wave of pioneers broke as it were against a wall here, until the Huguenots arrived in 1699, and sat down at Monacan. It was up to that event known as the World's End. By the time the first shot of the Revolution was fired, the tle outpost of the seventeenth century had grown to be a small scattered town clinging to a hillside; and it was not long before it was substituted for Williamsburg as the permanent capital, although, previous to 1860, its population probably had not yet mounted up to 5,000, even counting the slaves along with the freemen.

The year Mrs. David Poe, Edgar's mother, died (1811), Richmond was the most opulent city in the State, although it had not even then swelled much beyond the size of a straggling country town. All the influences of the social and economic system then prevailing in Virginia were obstructive to the rapid growth of the existing urban population. The tastes of the people as a body, from the highest to the lowest ranks, all turned towards rural pursuits and diversions as those affording them the highest satisfaction. The towns—among them Richmond—were not important even in an economic sense, except as convenient points for the distribution of plantation supplies, and as accessible markets, chiefly for the sale of wheat, maize and tobacco. At that day, not a turnpike entered the capital; and in winter, after drenching rains or heavy snows, the roads were almost impassable, although, until the construction of the James River and Kanawha Canal, these remained the principal local arteries of trade.

One of the sights most often failing under the traveler's eye as he rode down these highways in autumn was the hogshead of tobacco dragged, like a great clodcrusher, over stones and mudholes, up and down hills, until the Byrd, Rocketts, or Shockoe warehouse was reached. A wooden spike had been driven into it at either end to support the rude axle and the sapling shafts by which the horse or mule was able to pull it roughly along, to the sound of the cracking whip and the encouraging shouts of the negro perched upon a narrow seat high above the ponderous revolving cylinder. Many of these hogsheads were rolled in this primitive way for a hundred miles or more; a week was sometimes consumed in the journey; and in anticipation of this, the driver would carry along rations of bacon and meal, to be cooked at the roadside when he went into camp at noon or at nightfall.

The crops of the James River Valley, were, before the canal was dug, brought down in long batteaux that held from ten to twelve large hogsheads. The boatman were always slaves; and several days were ordinarily required by them for the voyage, the tedium of which was only relieved by the music of the far-borne notes of their bugles which they blew as the several landings came in sight.

One of the commonest sounds of those days in the streets of Richmond was the cry of the tobacco seller, who, having procured a receipt from the warehouse where his hogsheads had been deposited, hawked it about until a buyer turned up on the curb.

Not less familiar and far more musical was the jingling of the bells pendant to the harness of the teams of four or six horses, which drew to the city the heavy, roomy, canvas-covered wagons, laden with the produce of the Southwest, the Valley, and the Piedmont. This produce consisted of flour, butter, hemp, wax, tallow, flaxseed, feathers, deer and bear skins, furs, and ginseng. The wagons usually arrived in what was described as "fleets," and were sometimes so strung out as to resemble the baggage train of a small army. The horses were always o fa stout, robust breed, capable of enduring the fatigues of so hard a journey. As they drew near the city, they were halted by their drivers, and their withers decorated with bear skin mantillas, their bridles with red and yellow rosettes, and their tails with parti-colored ribbons; and as they entered the streets at a trot, their peals of bells seemed to ring out more merrily than ever.

At one period in Richmond's history, the money for which the tobacco from the Southside and these miscellaneous articles from the Blue Ridge, were exchanged—when metals were used at all—were shapeless pieces of large coins rudely split with an axe, and locally known as "bits" and half bits." Dollars were sometimes chopped up in the same rough way; and this evil was only stopped by the merchants refusing to receive any clipped money.

In consequence of the stream of people from the country visiting the town in the course of all this trading, the number of inns was far greater than the resident population would have justified. Most of these inns were still designated by their eighteenth century name of "coffee houses," which they still deserved, for smoking cups of tea, coffee, and chocolate were by the negro servants carried round among the guests. These guests, in winter, drew their chairs up in a circle in front of the great flaming hearth in the public room, and in summer seated themselves at the open windows to observe what was going on in the streets. The public houses were always known by some titular object painted, with little artistic skill, on their swinging signs. In Poe's youth, the most popular were the Bird-in-Hand, the Rising Sun, the Eagle, and the Swan. The latter hostelry, which survived him, was, in its day, celebrated for its choice wines, its well cooked food, and its interesting company, which included some of the most distinguished men then in public office. It was not until a later age that the word "hotel" was used; a term that sprang up when the larger population of the city, swelled by the increase in the number of visitors through the building of local railroads, led to the erection of spacious caravanseries.

In Poe's childhood, the word "tavern" had begun to creep in and to be used as a substitute for "coffee house." Many of the "mine hosts" of these ancient ordinaries were worthy successors of the rubicund Bonifaces made forever famous by the slyly humorous pens of the classical seventeenth century writers of England. The most celebrated in his own community was the landlord of Bowler's Tavern, whose appearance has been vividly described by one of the gossiping chroniclers of this period of the town's history. His face is said to have been as rosy as fifty years of mint juleps could paint it.

His habitual outer dress consisted of top boots and buff shorts, a scarlet

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waistcoat and a green coat embellished with shining gilt buttons. His head was adorned with a wig of carroty tint tapering off in a long queue, while the whole appendage was surmounted by a military cocked hat. It was of no concern to these fat and placid publicans that the mail bags from the North arrived in the city only twice a week, and that it required six days to convey a letter from New York to Richmond. The patrons of the taverns and coffee houses did not then number among them a crowd of strangers from remote places beyond the boundary of the State; it was like a secluded country town of England in this respect, except that the regular sessions of the Legislature and the terms of the Court of Appeals, drew thither at least once a year many men who were prominent in the Commonwealth.

Physically, the town resembled a very large village. There was a main street, which, in these early times, was shaded by rows of the quivering, silvery Lombardy poplar, a tree which Mr. Jefferson had been the first to transplant to Virginia. All the sewerage being carried off by surface drainage, water that had bubbled up from springs situated within the bounds of the corporation was suffered to run in a stream down some of the principal thoroughfares. Shockoe Hill had taken the place of the modern Church Hill as the most fashionable quarter, and was even then remarkable for the imposing beauty of many of its homes. With few exceptions, each residence stood in the centre of a plat covering an acre or two, or even more; and the open spaces were embellished with spreading elms and with magnillas and exotic shrubbery; and here and there was a garden filled wth pinks, roses, hollihocks and other old-fashioned flowers. The variety of the architecture was an impressive feature; and equally impressive was its exact adaptation in lofty ceilings, wide halls and ample porches to a warm climate. The interiors of these beautiful homes were adorned with a profusion of artistic objects, such as family portraits, landscapes in oil, engravings, bronze figures, busts, silver, china, furniture and books, many of which had come down from remote colonial times.

Who were the people who occupied these stately mansions? As the capital of the Commonwealth, Richmond afforded the most lucrative practice of any bar in Virginia; and it followed that the membership of this bar was of the highest order of distinction, whether considered from the point of view of learning, character or talents. The centre of this notable circle was the great Chief Justice, John Marshall, whose entire freedom from pretension gave his daily intercourse with his friends and neighbors, whether in his own home or on the streets, an air of almost patriachal dignity and simplicity. Not far from his residence stood the residences of such conspicuous forensic leaders as John Wickham, Benjamin Botts, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, George Hay, Judge Nicholas and Daniel Call. Hardly less distinguished were the numerous officials whose duties, under the State or municipal administration, required them to remain in Richmond throughout the year—men like Jaqueline Ambler, John Robertson and Archibald Blair, who were also representatives of old and influential families. Of equal prominence in the community were the principal physicians, such as Dr. Foushee, Dr. McClurg and Dr. McCaw, and the editors of the foremost journals, which then possessed a national reputation.

But not yielding the palm even to these brilliant heads of the several professions were the wealthier merchants of the city—men like Robert Gamble, Thomas Adams and Thomas Rutherfoord, who, to great probity and sagacity, united a broad public spirit in their connection with the affairs of the town and the State.

The three whom we have named were, with the possible exception of Mr. Rutherfoord, of American nativity; but there were also to be found in the community a large number of merchants of foreign birth. The most conspicuous of these were the Scotch representatives of British firms trading in tobacco; many of whom were young men who intended to return to their native country in the end; but there were also some, who, like William Galt, the uncle of Mr. Allan, looked upon themselves as citizens of the place for life, and as such were ambitious of winning a high position in its society.

This circle of distinguished judges, political officials, lawyers, physicians, journalists and merchants, native or foreign-born—men of character, wealth, ability, learning, and culture—gave a lustre to the social life of the town out of all proportion to its really small population. Although it could boast of no authors, there was a general taste for reading among the members of the educated classes; and also a remarkable familiarity with all the English and with most of the Latin classics. The refinement of this body of persons manifested itself not only in their enjoyment of books of the highest order of merit, but in their unaffected urbanity and courtesy of manner; in their unstinted, though unostentatious hospitality to strangers visiting the city; in the chivalrous bearing of the men towards women and in their sensitiveness on all points of personal honor; and finally in the purity, modesty, charm and beauty of the women themselves.

Although the circle was a small one, it was constantly enlivened by different forms of social gaiety. Apart from the succession of balls, dinner parties and card parties occurring in private houses, and the liberal patronage of the theatre during the season, there was a particular relish for the excitements of the turf.

The Richmond Jockey Club seems to have held at least two meetings in the course of the year—one taking place in the autumn, the other in the spring—and on these brilliant occasions, there was always an animated throng of spectators representing all that was most pleasure-loving and most fashionable in the city and the neighboring counties. We are told that the streets, for several days, were filled with fine coaches drawn by blooded horses; that the sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians; that the shops were overflowing with customers, and that every family threw their doors wide open from garret to basement for as many guests as they could squeeze inside. The races were always closed with a ball at the Eagle Tavern. This ball opened with a minuet and ended with a jig; the interval was interspersed with contra dances, and the contra dances were in turn varied with a hornpipe or a Congo.

Loo was, for some years, the most popular game of cards, but after the shock caused by the destruction of so many lives in the burning of the theatre in 1811, this game fell into disfavor from its association in the public mind with gambling. Quoits also had many skilful and enthusiastic devotees. There were two organized clubs in the city during Judge Marshall's residence there; each assembled at a favorite spring, and when the last pitch had been made, dinner, consisting of plain, old-fashioned Virginian dishes, was served and washed down with toddy, punch or mint julep, as each player might prefer. No betting seems to have been allowed at this patriarchal game.

Lotteries flourished in these times, and the tickets were bought, not only openly by the whites, but also furtively by the slaves. Drinking, if not to excess, with great liberality, was one of the vices of that day; and it was undoubtedly increased by the extreme sociability which prevailed among the members of the highest class, whose example was followed by all below them in the social scale.

At every turn in the white people's lives, the negro slaves were their faithful and sympathetic companions. They formed the only domestic servants, and as such were present at every scene in the inner family history, from the hour of birth to the hour of death. Among their masters, there were still old men surviving who habitually wore cocked hats, satin shorts and big wigs. Some of the free blacks were even more tenacious of the picturesque costumes of the past. There was a famous colored violinist still living who had led the orchestra in the palace at Williamsburg, when Botetourt, as Governor, presided over the official balls, surrounded by the most beautiful women and the most gallant men then to be found in the Colony. This negro, down to the end, never appeared at an entertainment in Richmond, either private or public, to take his place at the head of the musicians without presenting himself in an embroidered silk coat and waistcoat of lilac tint, small clothes, silk stockings and shoes decorated with enormous buckles. A brown wig concealed his bushy wool, while his deportment was a stately as that of the most polished gentleman of Fauquier's court. On Sunday, after the services in the African churches had closed, the sidewalks were enlivened with all the colors of a tropical aviary, as the slaves, both men and women, dressed in the discarded finery of their masters and mistresses, the brightest textures being selected, paraded homeward to dining room and kitchen.

The only persons who, in these holiday hours, could rival the slaves in a display of Benjamin's coat were some of the Frenchmen, who, as caterers or tutors, had settled in Richmond after the Revolution, in which as servants or soldiers of the French army, they had generally taken some part. Joseph Bonardel was long a conspicuous figure, not so much as an efficient and faithful teacher of the French language, or as a model for the Virginian youth of Gallic suavity and urbanity, not so much for all these qualities, in which he is said to have excelled, as for the extreme, though antiquated splendor of his ordinary costume. According to Mordecai, to whose interesting book of reminiscences we are indebted for many of the facts of this article, this costume consisted of a court dress of the age of Louis XIV., made up as follows: "A stock of silk fastened behind with a buckle set in paste, a vest of figured brocade falling below the hips and garnished with many buttons, a coat of purple velvet, smallclothes, knee buckles of black silver and shoe buckles of the same material, but shining like the sun. In his pocket he carried a gold snuff box, and in his hand a silver-headed cane.

It is evident from the foregoing descriptions that Richmond, in Poe's youth, was not without its picturesque patches of gay color, and not devoid of individualities who would have keenly delighted the heart of a student of manners. The refined and cultured provincialism of the town gave a racy flavor of its own to the character of its people, which could not have failed to impress a susceptible and observant nature like the future poet's, especially, if, like his, that nature had been brought under these influences from early childhood.

Dr. and Mrs. B. F. Wilson and Mrs. George E. Sipe attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church at Louisville, Ky., this week.

P. J. Leadbetter, principal of the Dayton High School, has returned to his home in Ashland.

Rev. Mr. Ludwing, of Hagerstown, Md., was a recent visitor in Dayton.

The Elkton public school teachers have left for their homes as follows: Principal B. C. Williams, to Fredericktown, Md.; Miss Mary J. Cox, to Manassas; Misses Cornelia and Monica Critcher, to Lynchburg; Miss Lena Cooper, to Mt. Jackson.

Mr. and Mrs. George G. Grattan, Jr., entertained a few of their friends at bridge whist Wednesday night.

The opening german Tuesday night by the Harrisonburg German Club was a brilliant affair.

Lynn Rhodes has returned to Washington, after a visit to his father, Dr. Rhodes, near Spaders Church. He is a member of the United States Army, and will leave next week for Asia.

Miss Ella Gillespie has returned to Baltimore, after a visit to her sister, Mrs. Walter N. Sprinkel.

Mrs. W. J. Campbell, of Dayton, has returned from a visit to her brother-in-law, Rev. Mr. Ashby, in Shenandoah City.

Harrisonburg Social News

[Special to The Times-Dispatch.]

Harrisonburg, Va., May 20.—Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Buchanan and daughter, Miss Irene, returned Wednesday from a visit to relatives in Philadelphia.

Postmaster W. H. Boyd, Mrs. Boyd and child, returned Thursday to their home in Heathsville, after a visit to Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Van Pelt.

Mrs. A. M. Newman and daughter, Mrs. T. N. Thompson, left Tuesday for an extended visit to relatives in Baltimore.

Mrs. Philip W. Effinger is visiting her former home at Greenville, Augusta county.

Charles L. Pennypacker and bride, formerly Miss Agnes Lyman, arrived Tuesday from Chicago to visit the former's parents in Broadway.

Dr. Ormond Stone, of the University, was a visitor at the State Normal School this week.

Miss Rosalie Sprinkel has returned from a visit to Staunton and Waynesboro.

Mr. and Mrs. Guy Cowgill were recent visitors at the home of Mrs. Cowgill's parents, Mr. and Mrs. George W. Lohr, near Timberville.

Mrs. Huffman and little son are visitors at the home of Walter Showwalter, at New Erection.

Mrs. W. A. Bradford, of Clarke county, is visiting at the home of James H. Dwyer, on North Main Street.

W. O. Corkle is a delegate from Harrisonburg to the annual Confederate reunion, at Little Rock, Ark.

George Farrar, of Clifton Forge, recently visited his daughters, Miss Nell, at the State Normal School, and Miss Janet, at Mary Baldwin Seminary, the latter accompanying her father to Harrisonburg.

Miss Geneva Swoope, of Williamsville, is the guest of Mrs. Albert M Loewenbach.

Mrs. Herbert Soffman left yesterday for New York, to visit her sister.

Ralph Staples has returned from a tour through the Southern States.

Mrs. Kimball, daughter and son, of Casper, Wyo., the last named a cadet at the Staunton Military Academy are guests of Mrs. E. Purcell.

Mrs. Kate Gibson and daughter, Miss Kate, have returned to Marshall, Fauquier county, after a visit to her sister, Mrs. S. R. Martz.

Colonel John R. Avis left yesterday for his home in San Francisco, after a visit to his brother, Captain James L. Avis.

Arvonia Social News

[Special to The Times-Dispatch.]

Arvonia, Va., May 20.—Misses Louise and Bliss Williams, who have been spending some time at their country home, "Bryn Arvon," here, have returned to Richmond.

Miss Sallie Shepherd and mother, of Palmyra, Va., have been visiting at the home of Mrs. E. R. Williams, here.

Mrs. Rudd, formerly Miss Page Newman, of Orange county, is visiting her sister, Mrs. C. Graham Thomas.

Miss Ella Boswell, who spent last winter at Warminster, has returned to her home in New Canton, where she will spend the summer.

Rev. John Spencer, of Buckingham, one of the best known ministers of Buckingham county, spent several days at the home of his daughter, Mrs. L. O. Pierce, this week.

Mr. and Mrs. Ralph C. Root spent last week in Richmond.

Mrs. R. M. Newman, after a visit to her daughter, Mrs. Graham Thomas, has returned to her home at Somerset.

A. W. Carter, of Dillwyn, was a visitor at the Arvonia Inn last week.

Miss Annie Pankey, one of the most popular young women of Arvonia, visited Miss Hannah Martin, in Charlottesville last week.

Mrs. Forest Guthrie is visiting her sister, Mrs. Louis Pierce.

The venerable Ex-Sheriff William Williams, of Diana Mills, visited Arvonia last week.

Professor A. C. Laughlin, who last year was principal of a school in Pittsylvania county, and who is an applicant for the principalship of the new Arvonia High School, was a visitor here this week. Professor Laughlin was educated abroad, in France and in Germany, and is an accomplished linguist.

William J. Hubard, State lecturer of the Virginia Royal Arch Masons, arrived in Arvonia Monday and spent the week here instructing the local chapter. The chapter is in a flourishing condition, having increased its membership since its founding here, two years ago, to about thirty members.

The Buckingham High School closed this week with an elaborate program. Professor Oregon F. Morgan, of Minneapolis, had charge of the school during the session. There were a number of graduates, mostly young women.